

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-27

THE NEW YORK TIMES
20 December 1979

Rebuilding American Intelligence

By Ray S. Cline

WASHINGTON — The Iranian crisis illuminates tragically the low state to which the United States central-intelligence system has been reduced. In the last five years, savage news-media and Congressional criticism as well as Carter-Mondale punitive restrictions on the Central Intelligence Agency have disastrously weakened our capability for conducting clandestine intelligence operations abroad.

While violence, anarchy, war and anti-Americanism have been spreading, the Government has retired or dismissed nearly all of the experienced intelligence officers tempered in the conflicts of the 1950's and 60's. It has dampened C.I.A. morale, chilled energetic efforts to collect hard-to-get information, and cut Americans off from many valuable foreign intelligence sources. This incredible conduct has amounted to unilateral disarmament.

Now in the Iran confrontation, Washington has few options between surrender and sending in the Marines. There is no quick fix. We must begin to get our intelligence house in order before the next crisis and the one after that strike. What should we do?

We must rebuild what we have nearly destroyed. Four measures would help.

First, the name "C.I.A." has to go. The semi-fictional "C.I.A." of world headlines is an international whipping boy on which the K.G.B. and every tin-horn dictator or ayatollah blame their difficulties. Regrettably, the name is a liability abroad.

Second, we must raise to new levels of excellence the analytical and information-processing elements of the several intelligence agencies in the C.I.A. and the State and Defense Department. They should be gathered under one budgetary and administrative roof and designated the United States Intelligence Community (U.S.I.C.). The Community would be an association of agencies in different Government departments responsible for the quality and relevance of their work to a single managerial chief, the Director of National Intelligence. The director ought to be selected for a term of five years on the basis of character and intellect plus bona fide experience in both research scholarship and high-level policy management of intelligence operations. The Community's aim should be totally objective, depoliticized intelligence reporting. The U.S.I.C. would be responsible for assigning tasks to intelligence collectors as well as for coordinating intelligence reporting, but it would be decentralized into competing centers of research and intelligence estimates. Nothing illegal or operational would ever be done by the analytical intelligence service.

Third, the intelligence-collection agencies, which often must break foreign laws to get crucially needed information, should be set up as independent commands in the State and Defense Departments or in other Cabinet departments that have overseas responsibility such as the Treasury, Commerce and Agriculture Departments. Clandestine-agent operations overseas, signal interception, and overhead and underwater technical reconnaissance should be carried out by strictly professional staffs who respond directly to requirements from the U.S.I.C. Their overseas personnel must have solid diplomatic cover.

Fourth, the major effort would be to create a new clandestine-operations command responsible for establishing secret contacts abroad. The chief should be an experienced C.I.A. officer whose identity must remain hidden except from Congressional intelligence committees. He and his staff would be assigned authentic State, Defense or other official cover — not the transparent "reserve-officer" status that in the past has exposed many C.I.A. employees abroad with the pitiful results we see in Iran.

The main clandestine-information-collection target ought to be early evidence of violent changes or fundamental shifts in political power in consequential countries. In menacing situations, we should use our undercover assets in covert actions to help friendly individuals and groups abroad with the hope that they might prevent seizures of political power by hostile or anarchic forces. Covert operations have bolstered American policy in the past; after skillful rebuilding of overseas nets, they would be capable of doing so in the future.

Advance notification of covert-action plans should be restricted to the Senate and House intelligence committees, where tight security controls exist. The foolish law now requiring advance notification of 150 Congressmen in eight committees, almost guaranteeing leaks, should be repealed. Then the President in consultation with a small group of responsible Congressmen could use our potential capacities for meeting Soviet, Cuban and other underground warriors on equal terms rather than letting Americans abroad be sitting ducks as they were in Teheran.

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